THE SQUIRREL
IN
THE COURT-YARD

BY

A. V. SUBRAMANIAN

TAMILNADU
TEXTBOOK SOCIETY
MADRAS

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TRANSCOMPOSITIONS FROM
TAMIL SANGAM LYRICS

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Translator
A. V. SUBRAMANIAN

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PREFATORY NOTE

IT is mainly due to the happy inspiration of the Hon'ble Thiru M. G. Ramachandran, the Chief Minister of the Government of Tamil Nadu, that the Government of Tamil Nadu have decided to undertake the stupendous task of translating the great Classics of the world into Tamil and the great Tamil Classics into world languages. In fact, the Hon'ble Thiru C. Aranganayagam, the Education Minister to the Government of Tamil Nadu has declared more than once that the Government of Tamil Nadu is prepared to spend any amount in connection with this work of translation and publication. By an order dated 8-5-1978 the Government of Tamil Nadu has constituted an Expert Committee under the Chairmanship of Dr. Justice S. Maharajan with the following well-known scholars as members:

1.	Thiru K. S. MAHADEVAN,	the then Director of Tamil Development since replaced by his successor,
	Dr. M. NANNAN.	
2.	Dr. S. V. SUBRAMANIAN,	Director, International Institute of Tamil Studies.
3.	Dr. C. BALASUBRAMANIAN,	Head of the Department of Tamil Language, University of Madras.
4.	Dr. C. R. SARMA,	Regional Secretary, Sahitya Academy, Madras.

It is a fact well known to students of literary history that if the French language excels many other languages in its power of articulation, precision of expression and in its capacity for expressing different and delicate nuances of thought and feeling, it is mainly because of the work of thousands of dedi-

cated scholars who, for nearly three centuries, continuously translated Greek, Latin, German, Spanish and Arabic Classics into the French language and enriched it. If the laudable project of the Government of Tamil Nadu is implemented properly and with gusto, the translations are bound to offer to the Tamils glimpses of a new world of vision and experience, and in the very process of translation, the translators will be amazed to find how the foreign Classics force the Tamil language to speak in new accents and add to Tamil a new dimension of expression. The afflatus of foreign thinkers and poets, the creative breath of their inspirations is bound to further quicken and energise the Tamil language, which, as has been observed by Winslow, is, in its poetic form more polished and exact than Greek. The translations from the foreign classics into Tamil are a wholesome mode of blood-transfusion which can impart a fresh vigour to the Tamil language and strengthen the seeds of its future creativity. With this hope we launch this series of translations.

S. Maharajan
Chairman,
Expert Committee for Translation
of Classics,
Government of Tamil Nadu, Madras

INTRODUCTION

'THE SQUIRREL IN THE COURT-YARD' is a transcomposition of representative poems selected from the entire gamut of Tamil Sangam Lyrics. It requires great scholarship and deep sensibility to unravel the pleasures of the recondite Sangam Poetry. A. V. Subramanian possesses both these qualities and in addition to his bi-lingual competence, he is able to charge his verses with the music of rhythm, which is the soul of poetry. It is hoped that his transcompositions of Sangam Lyrics will give the world glimpses of beauty which have hitherto remained hidden.

I thank my colleagues of the Expert Committee for their unstinting co-operation in bringing out the publication of this book. The Expert Committee's thanks are due to Thiru R. Kulandaivelu, Managing Director of the Tamilnadu Textbook Society and to his colleagues for the promptness with which they have completed the printing of this book.

S. MAHARAJAN
Chairman,
Expert Committee for Translation of Classics,
Government of Tamil Nadu, Madras

PREFACE

I HAVE greatly enjoyed reading the original lyrics in Tamil which have sparked off these transcompositions: this is the only excuse for my venturing to present an English version of them in verse. If poetry does not delight, it ceases to have any right to exist. Its claim to instruct and to elevate can be dismissed as of little importance as these objectives can be better secured more economically (in words) and more directly (owing to ease of comprehension) through prosaic narrative. Sangam poetry is superlative precisely because of its superior ability to delight the reader. Over the years I have gone back to these pieces for renewed pleasure: what they lacked in the element of surprise, when reread many times over, they more than supplied in guaranteed literary enjoyment. A natural result was the growing desire in me to share with English readers some part of the enduring joy I have derived from a study of these pieces.

I am modest enough to realise that the most perceptive reader of these transcompositions can at best derive only a part of the joy that has been mine as a native Tamil who has had the great good fortune to study the recondite language of the Sangam Age. For it is a banal cliche to say that poetry cannot be translated into verse in another language, that, if translated, it will not have the impact of the original. This is certainly so because of differences of cultures, of social environment, of literary traditions, indeed because of several overwhelming factors. But, for these reasons to deny the non-Tamil reader the exquisite pleasure (even in part) realisable on a perusal of these poems transcomposed into English will amount to a cowardly running away from a task that is admittedly difficult but one that must be performed. Since not many have undertaken to do this job, I have taken it up on the assumption that even if

I do not have much of a qualification for it, I have the needed courage. And, for this reason, I shall be genuinely concerned at the criticism, if made, that these pieces do not induce any pleasure in the reader impelling him to come back to them for renewed bouts of enjoyment. I shall reject, for the same reason the uncritical statement (which I hope will not be made) that these transcompositions are not as good as the original Tamil pieces. For it is no intelligent criticism to say that a transcomposition is not as good as the original: and it does great harm in discouraging the harassed person attempting such a genuinely thankless task, without adding one bit to the existing body of literary criticism.

The originals were selected from out of over two thousand pieces — a large enough body from which to select. I have adopted the criterion of translatability as rather important and on this account several beautiful passages had to be left out, as they contain ideas which are strictly local, which may appear amusing, even grotesque in an alien medium. I have naturally set before me as my objective the presentation of the ruling sentiment of the poem which, after all, is the heart of the thing. I have furnished in the introduction the necessary background material encompassing the literary conventions of the Sangam Tamils without an understanding of which the poems of the period cannot be savoured at all. The few Tamil words I have retained in the transcomposition are names of flowers, characteristic of the five regions, which do not need a translation. The index provided at the end will help the assiduous reader to trace the original piece. I hope it will be widely used, as the crowning happiness for the reader acquainted with the Tamil language will be to track down and study the original lyrics in Tamil.

MADRAS, A.V. SUBRAMANIAN
9-5-1979.

INTRODUCTORY

POETRY anywhere is conditioned and shaped by literary tradition: in a few notable instances it is even inspired by it. Poetry of another age and a very distant age like the Sangam has to be savoured in the background of the many traditions and conventions a knowledge of which is presumed in the reader. Hence it is proposed to give a brief idea of the more important conventions and regulations which bind the Sangam lyrics.

The conventions by which Sangam love poetry is bound are based on a very distinct philosophy of love between man and woman. The ancient Tamils thought that love is divinely inspired: a boy and a girl get united in sacred wedlock only through the machinations of a specialist deity. The physical act of love was regarded as much the lesser part of the process of love-making: indeed the Tamil concept of love was metaphysical. This love is first born in the boy and the girl in a meeting which the Tamils believed is arranged for by the patron Goddess of Love. This incipient love develops in a series of clandestine meetings helped on by the (girl) friend of the girl, a most interesting and enterprising character. This secret love is set in the background of mountain slopes and verdant forests and the preferred part of the day is midnight — all doubtless chosen to safeguard the precious secret.

Indeed there is an organic relationship between the various stages and moods of Tamil lovers and the landscape, the flora and the fauna, even the season and the part of the day when things happen. Everywhere in the world poets make dexterous use of nature in evoking sentiments but the ancient Tamils were probably unique in laying down an elaborately structured convention where the stages of love and types of landscape have an organic, integrated relationship, based firmly on natural association.

This convention is so much rooted in the Tamil mind that if monkeys and bears and bamboos and jackfruit are referred to in a poem, the sentiment of clandestine pre-marital love is surely evoked in the reader's mind: this renders redundant a detailed description of the mountain background; this certainly makes for brevity and saves reader's time but, more significantly, makes it possible for the poet to secure the infinite literary benefits of suggestion.

The next stage is set in the grassy meadows where through the long day there is an air of expectation of the cattlemen leading their cows home to the waiting wives and calves. Naturally the meadows have become the setting for poems that treat of girls waiting for their lovers to return to them. The characteristic flora and fauna of this type of landscape which the poets use to evoke this sentiment are the *mullai* flower, the deer, the rabbit, the cattle and the favourite games of dairy-farmers like bull-baiting.

The sea-shore villages form the setting for a more accentuated sentiment of love-in-separation. This fits in naturally with the landscape where women wait anxiously all through the endless day for their fishermen husbands to return home from their fishing expedition. The Tamils were a seafaring nation and when the husband leaves on a commercial expedition for Java or Cambodia, the parting is of much longer duration and reunion, with all the perils of voyaging on the high seas, quite uncertain. The dark blue *neidal* flower and the crab and the killer shark are among the chosen symbols evoking this sentiment.

The sharpest and the most accentuated form of the sentiment of love-in-separation is set in the background of desert tracts. Men have to venture out of their homes to distant places to earn money with which to run their home and their journey takes them through the burning desert where all life withers away and pitiless brigands lie in wait to plunder and

kill the hapless wayfarer. The setting is appropriate for the sentiment of love that takes on a sharp edge of desperation not surprisingly some of the finest poems in all Sangam literature have the desert as their setting. The symbols chosen to evoke the sentiment are the trees and bushes that are classified as desert vegetation: the *palai* is the chief floral symbol: and the ever-hungry jackal and the cruel kite are the symbolic fauna.

The married couple settle down in a town in a riverine basin and for a time all is bliss. But man is not destined to be continually happy: the husband gets ensnared by the coquetry of public women and begins to neglect his wife and home. Usually in such cases he comes back home on hearing of the birth of a son. Many are the poems treating of the foot-loose husband and the sorrowing wife, set in the background of well-watered plains where food is available in plenty and life is easy and man's mind naturally turns to vice. The evocative symbols for this fifth kind of landscape are the water-buffalo, the rice plant, the lotus and above all else the *marutham* flower.

If poetry is the vehicle of transference of experience, the conventions of the ancient Tamils help actively in making the vehicle effective. The individual pieces in the group called *Akam* which comprises all love poems are short, some of them quite tiny, of five or six lines in length. Each is a separate and distinct piece and has nothing to do with the preceding or the succeeding one. These Sangam love lyrics can best be compared to exquisite carvings on small pieces of ivory, each complete and artistically perfect in itself. Now in such short pieces it would not be easy to evoke the necessary emotional associations to enable the reader to undergo the desired experience on transfer from the poet's mind. The expertly conceived symbols, as we have seen, however, help quickly to create in the reader's mind the necessary emotional associations. The creation of the necessary sympathetic and receptive emotional frame of mind would constitute the first step in the process of transference of experience.

One of the essential things the poet has to accomplish in this process of transference is the universalisation of the experience. The Tamil convention lays down firmly that no names or other identifying details of the characters can be mentioned in love lyrics. The ban is so total and is considered of such fundamental importance that some wonderfully poetic love lyrics are classified under *Puram* (as distinct from *Akam* which comprises love lyrics) only on account of the mention in them of the names of the characters. This convention is given all this importance only because this, more than anything else, ensures universalisation of the experience by shedding what are particular, unique and local.

Another vital convention that helps this process of transfer of experience relates to the manner in which the poems are presented: every love lyric is given out in the version of one of the characters and none is set forth in the version of the poet. Even among the characters, the meticulous convention permits only some, the privilege of speaking and bans the version of the others. All this clearly is intended to secure authenticity of involvement in the emotional part of the experience. In the transcompositions presented here, all love lyrics are introduced by a statement, like '*The boy speaks*' or '*The girl speaks*' or '*The friend of the girl speaks.*' This too is a rule that is universally observed in the field of *Akam* or love-lyrics, no exceptions being allowed; we cannot cite a single stanza of this group that is set in the version of the poet himself.

A word about the *Puram* group of verses of which a small, and it is hoped, a representative sampling is presented here. Clearly the ancient Tamils regarded love as the most fitting subject of their poetry: for, consider the figures: in the set of eight anthologies which constitutes the most important part of Sangam literature, as many as five are wholly devoted to *Akam* and only two *Puram*, the eighth having both *Akam* and *Puram* poems, the former predominating. *Puram* verses treat of heroism and of philanthropy but incidentally we get a good deal of

interesting matter relating to the administrative problems of kings and how people should or should not be taxed. There are many tender passages describing the plight of the bereaved on the death of a leading citizen. Subjects like education and ethics are discussed with rare insight. Even in the poems which are frankly panegyrical there is a freshness of outlook, there is something new and interesting. Even banal things take on a fresh glamour revealing new and unsuspected facets when they are looked at from an unusual angle, from an unfrequented eyrie at the top of a mountain.

A. V. Subramanian

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1

The girl speaks:

You ask me why I pine away
My youth, my precious youth, in tears.
When my lover stays by me
My heart is joyful, my heart is gay,
Even like a village on the eve of a feast.
But when he leaves as he has done,
My heart does get in time to be
Like a house in a village on the desert fringe
Busy once with teeming streets
Now with the desert marching on,
Forsaken by its people, doomed
Where in the courtyards free from men
The timid squirrel frisks about
In playful freedom: my heart gets empty,
Sad and lonesome like the house
Once full of life, now in ruins.

2

The girl speaks:

You see now the patches white
Of pallor on my skin.
They didn't show up when he was here
And stroked my limbs in love,
Like the weedy moss that keeps away
When on festive days
Pilgrims frequent the sacred pond,
It retreats at the touch!
They began on the day so long ago—
How far back it seems!—
When he left me for a long sojourn
Beyond the desert sands.
The pallor spreads like the mossy sheath
On the surface of the pond
When people do not congregate
For the temple festival,
On those banal days when it gets to be
Lonesome, unfrequented.

3

The girl speaks to her friend:

You ask me how, with him away
And no signs of his returning
I can keep my cheer, I can
Keep out the blues so long.
The chief of the hills, where, on the slopes
In the shallow pool, the toads
Set up a roar like the beat of drums—
He came on a moonlit night
Decked, my dear, with *mullai* blossom
And time stood still for us.
He left me, true, for distant climes;
But look, my shoulders still
Give off the bouquet of the *mullai* wreath,
The bloom from his native hills!

4

The friend of the girl speaks apparently addressing the owl but desiring that she may be overheard by the lover who has just arrived at the tryst, in order to prod him to ask the girl's parents for her hand in marriage.

O King of owls that occupy the hole
In the sacred tree hard by the village ford
Handsome bird with round, wide-open eyes
The sharpest claws and drum-like tenor voice!
I offer you the whitest rice and meat
Cooked with ghee and the roasted flesh of rats—
That royal dish of noble, high-born owls—
As sacrifice and all I ask of you
Is this: of silent nights when, nerves on edge,
The lover walks the risky mountain path
To keep the tryst we have fixed and all agog
We wait in palpitation, for our sake,
Can you keep from hooting, your strident call
That sends shooting, panic tremors through
The hearts of harried lovers?

5

The friend of the girl speaks:

What is the measure of the truest love?
A deer and his mate journeying long
In a desert were smitten with burning thirst.
Hours went by, there was no hint
Of water midst the scorching sands.
Then presto! they saw a water-hole
From a distance, cantered fast to it,
The male in the lead: he saw at once
How little water was left in the hole.
He thought quickly on his feet,
'If I went down and slaked my thirst
Nothing will be left for her to drink,
Nor will she go in ahead of me!'
The stag went down and put his mouth
In the scanty water, and made such a racket
Blowing out, not sucking in
The precious fluid, his mate convinced
He had drunk his full, went gladly down
And slaked her thirst to her heart's content.
The solicitude of the thirsty stag
His anxiety to sacrifice
In silence, nay, in secrecy,
Is surely the measure of the truest love!

The girl is anguished at her lover leaving her to traverse the barren desert: the girl's sorrow is sought to be assuaged by her friend who describes a scene involving a loving stag and his doe from which the lover will draw the necessary lesson.

6

The girl speaks:

You know his ardour, dear;
You know how of nights
He used to wait for me
Behind the *vēngai* tree
Like sculptored patience, once.
That seems so long ago:
He has been gone these months.
If he cannot come
And salve my bruised heart
Why does he fail to send
A bird-messenger, fleet
Of wings to assuage
This tree which was to him
The sole companion
Through hours of agony
When he lay in wait for me
Those lonely, silent nights?

7

The elders of the village utter when they see a pair of lovers eloping through the desert:

What is it we see before us?
It seems it was but yesterday
That when these two, chaperoned
By their doting foster-mothers
Met in the main street, they never could
Pass each other in terms of peace.
In a matter of moments winged words
Would get exchanged over nothing at all
And before you knew what had happened
From words they'd have come to fisticuffs.
He would seize hold of her coiffeured hair
And she would drag him by the sparse
Unkempt brown hair on his head;
Nor could the harassed foster-mothers
Separate the battling young wild cats!
O kindly deity that dispense
All matters of the heart! You have
Dispensed wisely in their case!
How you have wreathed their loving hearts
Firmly together in such a fashion
They could not wait for their elders' blessings,
They made up their minds to leave their homes
To be together in the desert sands
Disdaining a life of comfort
Apart from each other in their village homes.
Blessed are your machinations,
O dispenser of tender love!

8

The mother speaks:

In the darkest hours of the night gone by she left her home and hearth
And all she reckoned as dear to her, without a thought of me
She left this all to be with him–a stranger, a callow youth
Even now, the feckless girl, the daughter of my heart
Must be winding her painful way over burning desert sands
That hurt the feet like lumps of fire; but I do not grieve, in truth
Over the one that has fled her home; she must be exultant,
Unmindful of her environs, in the blissful company
Of him on whom the thoughtless girl has set her youthful heart.
At this hour when the eager bat that all the long day through
Had set its heart on foraging for a dainty meal of fruit
Sets out in joy, with out-spread wings, in the fading light of gloaming,
I deeply grieve over my neighbour's daughter: how she used to play
With my daughter in the palmy days before she met her youth,
Regardless of the passing hour! How she used to dread
The moment when her vexed mother would come to take her home!
Her only joy was to be with her, her only anguish parting
From her bosom-mate. Now left alone, my daughter gone away
She weeps heart-broken; she looks as if she never again shall smile!
Over her I grieve, this gloaming. How could my heartless daughter
Condemn her friend, in a selfish frenzy, to cheerless days
Of loneliness and tears?

9

The friend of the girl speaks:

You grieve, my dear, over his staying away.
He is the lord of hilly domains
Where the *kānthal** abounds. The eager bee
Too impatient to wait for the petals
To open at the moment of their own choosing
Just pries them open to plunder the pollen
Before the rest of the world learns of the flower.
The bees in his land can accomplish this;
Will he not do as much for you?
Indeed dear, when I ran into him
In the street one day, I drew for him
A picture of the torment you are going through
And he displayed the deepest sense
Of shame: indeed he was much inclined
To blame himself for all your heart-ache.
He clearly holds you dearer far
Than anyone else in all the world.
My dear, be solaced! For before long
He shall wed you and put a stop
To all this suspense, to all this anguish
Before the world of watchful eyes
Can uncover this, your secret courtship,
Before tireless tongues begin to fan up
Painful slander.

10

The friend of the girl speaks:

Less of your oaths, O Chieftain of the vaulting hills,
And more of deeds! Reflect how sorely pressed
My friend has been this long. This secrecy—
You cannot know how much of poignant grief
It occasions her. For only yesterday
Impelled by love you trod the mountain path
Replete with dangers to spend a fragrant moment
Locked in close embrace: time stood still.
You then parted after long adieux and you left for home.
We went in, the girl of your heart and I
And mother met us in the kitchen. She noticed
An eager swarm of hungry bees clust'ring on her shoulders
Perfumed by your embrace: and in anger she cried out,
"What's happening? This surely is a strange event!"
She must have shrewdly guessed at th' awful truth.
Your lady love, in utter panic, seeking some excuse,
All helpless looked at me in anxious expectation.
I cast around in desperation: I noticed
A sandal faggot placed by mother just then in the fire.
"You know, mother, bees best love the scent of sandal wood."
I ventured forth, "the bees you see came in
Perching on this faggot now in blaze: and when they felt
The mounting heat, they must have taken wing
And looking round for a perching place, they landed on your daughter!"
On hearing this her suspicions were for the moment, lulled—
But for how long? And for how long can your girl
Undergo such torment? If you care,
Mountain chieftain, for her feelings, you should strive
To end this secret wooing at your soonest
And all this tension, all this endless heart-ache
By a public wedding!

11

The girl speaks:

How dark is the night,
How quiet the world!
All living things
Rest in peaceful slumber
All stormy passions
Raging through the day
Lie embalmed
In blessed sleep
But I................
Only poor restless I
In anguished solitude
Unwinking pass the night!

12

The girl speaks:

It's quite a time
Since he stopped coming
What will I do, dear,
If he breaks the troth?
What will I do
If he denies all,
All that happened
In the river bank
Deep in the heart
Of the leafy bower?
For there was no witness
To testify.
Excepting him
And poor me
There was none
Who could bear
Testimony..............
But in truth,
There was one,
A lone witness.
Standing still
On a spindly leg,
Await for
The casual fish
Come swimming by
Was a lone heron
On the water's edge.

13

The boy speaks:

You are right in attributing
My present weakness of the mind
To my love for the hunter's daughter
In the hamlet on the mountain slope.
I was fiery: I could rage
Undaunted in the fields of battle.
But she came, as the gentle rain,
The doe-eyed maiden, soft of speech,
And presto, in a few fate-filled moments
Put out my raging inner fires!

14

The foster-mother speaks:

My daughter and her mate
Are nowhere to be seen.
How far have I wandered
How vain my search has been!
My legs are weak and wobbly
With all this wandering: the eyes
Do not see clearly
They are strained, weary, dim.
But where, O where are they?
I do not see them; but
I see plenty others.
How many are there,
The teeming, vexing others
That greet my eager eyes
Wherever I turn—
Superfluous couples
That crowd the narrow earth
More densely than the stars
That speck the firmament!

15

The boy speaks:

We shall not, my love, be ever parted!
In this bower we came together
Through God's decree, on a fated day
Your parents, your kinsmen are total strangers
To mine: and we met as strangers, too.
We came together, notwithstanding
And merged, like these drops of rain coming down
On the loose red earth of the mountain side
Making a whole, where the elements
Yield up their different identities
And merge in harmony, interacting
Grain upon grain, atom on tiny atom
So fused together they cannot be
Extricated or torn apart.
Like the spirit of the earth and the spirit of the raindrops
Our souls have fused at fate's bidding
And shall not, dearest, be parted, ever.

16

The friend of the girl speaks:

In the wooded slopes of your hill-domain
The slit-eyed boar in frenzied fury
Takes on the tiger in mortal battle.
Scenes of such reckless courage, undaunted
By certain death abound in the woods
Everywhere in your native hill.
The girl you love is in deep distress:
Her parents plan to give her away
To someone else in holy wedlock.
You still lack the courage to go
And ask of her father her hand, O chieftain!
I presume your love has not cooled off, yet.
Now, do not these scenes of dauntless courage
Of lower beings in your native hill
Put fresh heart in you to seek
Her hand in marriage and so revive her
From this gruelling pain, this heart-ache, chieftain,
From emaciation, from certain death?

17

The friend of the girl speaks:

What a woman! And what a love
That has endured through those empty days
And the lonely watches of the night,
The love that has so overwhelmed
All resentment at the crime of crimes—
The crime against itself! She brought
Prosperity to her husband's house
By the mere act of stepping in
As his bride. She was dear to him,
She was the light of his life for a while:
And what betrayal! He strayed away
He wore out his youth in the harlots' houses
While she pined away in silent suffering.
But lightning and thunder! When he stands without
At the door of her house in a plaintive pose
When the least she could do is to bang the door
In his faithless face, when his countless sins
Just cry out for retribution,
She welcomes him with her sweetest smile
On her glowing face, with words to match
With not a trace of all that agony
The heart-ache of these lonely days!
But what a change in the foot-loose husband!
Circumscribed by a sense of shame
That pervades all his inner being
He moves about in his ancestral house
Embarassment writ large on his features!

18

The girl speaks:

He stays away. Alone, I pine
All the limping long day through.
Comes the evening when the torrid sun
Sinks behind the western hill
And the dainty *mullai* blossoms forth
Wafting up the treasured thoughts
The sacred moments of savoured bliss
That sear the soul when now remembered.
I drop the things I'd started doing,
Stand petrified with anguish laden.
Such is the evening! But I bite my lips
And pull through, heartened by the faith
That night cannot be far behind,
Kindly night when I shall find
Emollients for my bruised soul.
But comes the night—and lo, my plight!
How far does the gloom of night
Spread before my desp'rate gaze!
The flood waters of murky night
Extend unto the farthest rim
Of far horizon! O, how shall I
Cleave my way with my palsied limbs
To yonder shore of effulgence
The shore of dawn beyond the gloom
Where hope beckons?

19

The friend of the girl speaks:

The chief of the seashore village! Greetings!
You see we've come as we had planned.
It wasn't easy, our getting out
In secrecy from our home and village
But here she is: in her company
Don't go forgetting the passage of time.
Let her hurry back home to her parents
Before she is missed and they find you here.
Me, I cannot tarry longer:
I have left my doll on the sandy beach
And I fear very much that the crane replete
With its dinner of succulent *āral* fish
May trod on my doll and crush her face.

20

The mother speaks:

You full well know I've neither chick nor child but this
You know, too, she left the house, led on
In simple trust by the boy we know, the one who lives
Across the way, who wields a fearless javelin
In the field of battle. Even now they must be treading
The pathless tracts of burning rocky wasteland
And yet you say in all your wisdom ripe
'Stench your tears!' How stench my welling tears?
She's gone, my heart's delight: at every turn
I miss the child—the prettiest picture come to life!
How silent are the rooms that once echoed
To her playful prancing! Now I dread to walk them.
The house resounded in those happy bygone days
To peals of girlish laughter: now it's sombre, still.
The frontal porch where through the afternoon
She churned up all her gusty games, the garden swing
She loved to ride—they mock my eager eyes
And turn to dust the yeasty hopes that sprout
In my aged breast.

21

The girl speaks:

Lured by lucre he left me anguished
With no thought of the evanescence
Of youth: nor back he comes to me,
Nor sends me tidings of where he is
Though swear he did that he would be
Home with me with the first showers.
My plight is such: and now the rain
The canny slut, with the *mullai* bloom
She has nurtured, for her teeth
Must laugh at this my simple faith
That he shall yet come back to me!

22

The foster-mother speaks:

How she has grown, the daughter of the house!
She now can woo a life of penury
Her attitudes are grown up, true; but times there were
When she would run in panic, hotly chased
By her aging foster-mothers, in their hands
A golden bowl of honey-sweetened milk
And a tufted rod to force the wayward girl
To drink it; but the little girl, too quick
For them, would scud like lightning, hide behind
The leafy creepers in the garden—all to dodge
The dainty dish. She scarcely ate her food
With relish all her girlhood through. But now
How hard is life for her! The man she loves
Having come down in the world, she finds it hard
To lead a decent life; and in her pride
She will not accept proffered help from this
Her parents' home where so much food is wasted!
The dear girl (how iron-hard her mind must be)
Uncomplaining, skips her meal all the long day through
Accepting but once a day a little, simple food!

23

The girl speaks:

Many are those that counsel me
To bear in patience all the heart-ache
Engendered by my love for him.
Do these wise men know the torment
Of a lovelorn bosom or are they those
Of rock-like grit that can overwhelm
The misery wrought by the loved one
Staying away? I, then, am not
One of them. For when he keeps away
Like this, for months and we do not meet
My heart is filled with the deepest grief
My body, day by painful day
Slowly wastes away; my life
Like the froth on the crest of the wave that beats
On the rock in the beach shall wear away
Into airy nothingness.

24

The friend of the girl speaks, with the boy listening in, concealed:

I wish, my dear, he does not come
Tonight to the secret tryst
I know you spend the long day, counting
The moments dragging by
Till you can be in his company
In silent, secret bliss.
But still I wish he does not come!
Look at the millet ears,
How ripe they are! And the farmers plan
To reap and garner them
All the night through, beating drums
To scare the beasts away.
The fields of corn will be filled with the bustle
Of farmers harvesting
And the din of the drums and the laughter of men.
Tonight is not the night
He should come and keep the tryst.
I wish he stays away—
And from the morrow we cease to come,
With the millet harvested.
Your meetings, dear, shall cease to be
O, how will you keep alive?

25

The friend of the girl speaks:

Master of lagoons where the *neidal* blooms
Black as maidens' eyes!
You love the power you wield, O chieftain,
Over my timid friend.
You do not seem to think of the pain
You occasion in her;
You like to woo but not to wed her
It isn't manly conduct!
It isn't manly, it's cowardly
This, your love of courtship
This, your hunger for the thrills of wooing,
Of secret trysting
And this, O chieftain, your drawing away
From the cares of the married state!
If you muster courage, if you ask for her hand
If you wed her early, chieftain,
That will be manly, more becoming
Of the he-man that is you!

26

The friend of the girl speaks:

Your lot is one that deserves pity, you lovely, lovely
parrots
Green of body, red of beak! For when the millet crop
Stood bent with the weight of well-filled ears ready for
harvesting,
You settled down to a ceaseless feast gorging your
pretty selves
On the plumpest ears of mature millet. But now the
fields are bare
Left with only the headless stalks: for the farmers came
and cut
And carried home the sheaves of grain. There now is
nothing left
For you to pick: but still you stay—you do not fly
away—
Bound by a love that does not falter, like this anguished
girl
Whose affection for the mountain chieftain unsustained,
unfed
By meetings at the secret bowers still waxes undimi-
nished
How pathetic is your love for the fields! How all
bereft of hope
O lovely parrots, it is still nourished and kept alive like
hers
By love remembered!

27

The girl speaks:

This is the endless conflict raging in my mind:
When he and I in the tryst meet and soul to soul unite
We dissolve in timeless bliss. But O! how fleet is time
How the blissful moments fly! For all too soon he finds
It's time for him to go. My loving heart, my dear
Is all aclamour to bid him come to be with me
The next and every night. But then my fitful mind
Recalls in all their horror the nameless terrors
Of the forest path he has to tread, not while the moon
Lights up the path but emerging when the darkest clouds
Quite conceal it—the path untrodden where snakes abound
Whose poison hoods are trampled on by the tiger on the prowl
And I dread his fearsome journey braving all this danger
To be with me—but can I urge my lips to say,
'Do not, dearest, brave the terrors that stalk the jungle path,
Do not come of nights!' My dear, how in the world can I
Shape my lips to speak such loveless words to him?
This then, my conflict: I cannot beseech him to come
Braving nightly terrors: but then, you know, I keep alive
Through the endless day with dreams of union
In secret nightly tryst.

28

The girl speaks:

You paint, my lover, the desert's terrors
In lurid colours: I too know
All the horrors that deserts harbour.
The wild cattle which feed on grass
Eat cacti for lack of aught else green.
The rains, which are scarce at the best of times
Often fail and the land takes on
The aspect of a fiery furnace.
The natives of this burning desert
With hearts as dry as the sands without
Shoot arrows at the hapless traveller,
Lured by hopes of gainful plunder;
Full well I know its rigours. But you,
You seem to know not how my heart
Would take the parting. Do not, dearest,
Wring my heart with pitiless words
Of leaving me when you sally forth
On your venture. If we go
You and I, attended by
The snags of the journey, that spells for me
Happiness. Come, we shall face
All the terrors of the journey together!
Separation is the only grief!

29

The boy speaks:

She is not the simple-minded girl
Once I thought she was. How resourceful
And deviously cunning she can be!
And what an actress consummate! For she
When, of nights, with flowers in her hair
Comes clandestine to me, she seems mine own:
Her own self is merged with mine. But comes the dawn
And what a change sweeps over her! She takes
The flowers off and dresses carefully her locks
Before leaving me: and 'midst her kinsmen keeps
The straightest face, with never a hint of all
That has been going on between us all this while
And when I turn up in her house, a casual guest,
She keeps away: and, if I address her
She mumbles something, as if overcome
By bashfulness, as a maiden daughter will
Before a youthful guest and a male and seemingly
To her a total stranger!

30

The friend of the girl speaks:

Mountain chieftain!
Rain clouds pile up
To deepen the gloom.
It rains in torrents
And all the earth
Is overflowing
With gushing streams
Of rain water.
In the foggy night
When all the world
Is deep in sleep
(Only we are awake)
How did you come,
O mountain chieftain!
How did you find
Your way to this
The tryst where
We await you,
Where the air is thick
With the heady scent
Of the *vēngai* blossom?
How did you come
In this night of nights,
O mountain chieftain?

31

The friend of the girl speaks to the boy:

Chief of beaches where, on the sands,
The restless waves of the sea
Pile lustrous pearls which no one gathers!
Such is your prosperity!
But the fame of a chief does seldom rest
On wealth, on mere things.
He who succours a suppliant
Is greater than all the kings.
Fame deserts him who turns his face
From the one to sorrow given.
If you covet fame, go assuage
The heart that's badly riven!

32

The boy addresses his own mind:

My mind these days nags me on
To leave the house and sally forth
On a second journey to distant lands
That I may toil and garner wealth.
It's true my money is running out
The money I earned in my former venture.
How vivid in my mind is the trip I made
Through barren burning desert sands
Where to keep alive takes all one has.
The few living things, in the pitiless heat
Of the noon day sun beating down
Seem to suffer untold grief.
An eagle, pregnant and in the grip of pain
Is seen perched on the highest branch
Of a tree grown gaunt but leafless, bare
Casting a fitful spotted shade.
In the shade are boys from the hunters' homes
Playing with the dried up *nelli* fruits
Which they throw on the bone—dry ground
Stone-hard with the heat of a hundred summers.
Over the desert's western fringe
Sets the sun and the shroud of darkness
Envelops the trackless waste.
Now the distant drum of bandit bands
Sends tremors of a panic fear
Through the heart of the luckless wayfarer
Who all the day had noticed skulls
And rotting bones of hapless victims
Half-buried in the rolling sands.
In the gathering dusk where no lights
Redeemed the darkness, my mind went back

To evening scenes in my own house,
Where lighting the lamps, my wife sent up
Ardent prayers for my safe return.
The picture of my wife in my lustrous home
Symbolised the project's end,
The culmination, success—crowned
Of all my toil, all my sweat.
The vision that rose before my mental eye
At that moment when the journey had taken
A fearsome aspect, when its rigours
Loomed the largest did inspire me
To hurry forth and consummate
The project I had taken up
And to hurry back to the loved one
Await for me in my happy home.
My wayward mind! Having suffered
All this once, why urge me on
To undertake a second venture,
A second brush with the nameless terrors
That lie in wait for the traveller?—
A second parting from my heart's delight
From the light of my life, the queen of my home?

33

The girl speaks to her friend after the secret love between her and the boy has been discovered by her mother, who, furious at this, imprisons her in the house to prevent her meeting her lover:

Life has nothing to offer me
When alone I sit in morbid brooding
While the slow day crawls to dismal evening
And the night that seems to last forever.
Like the *mahanril* bird which languishes
If a lotus bloom conceals her mate
For the space of a moment from her field of vision,
I welcome death in his company
Rather than exist through endless years
In cheerless loneliness.

34

The friend speaks to the girl in the hearing of the boy who has come to the tryst: the girl pretends she does not know he is there, her intention in saying all this being to urge him on to ask for her hand in marriage.

O, What misfortune! Now your love shall wither!
Mother is cross and you're helpless, imprisoned.
You cannot have those pleasant afternoons
Any longer in the millet fields with him!
Our secret's out and how it did come out!
When we were guarding the rip'ning millet crop
Mother came one afternoon and finding us
Missing from the guarding platform in the fields
She waited, fuming: she caught us coming down
From the woods in bloom, right on the mountain slopes.
'Where had you been?' demanded she, her ire roused,
'I found the post of duty deserted
And the millet thick with thieving flocks of parrots!'
You blurted out, 'I do not, mother, know
The chief of the hills where waterfalls resound
Nor met him now in the flowering woods hard by.
And in truth, with the stringed instrument
With which we drive the flocks of birds away
And decked with jungle blooms, along with him
I swear I did not swim in the mountain pool
And play, all the morning, water-sports wiht him!
Unpractised in the gentle art of lying
You came out with the naked truth: and mother heard
And hung her head in the deepest shame at this
Your secret love and the way it stood revealed.
Shame gave way to a ruthless burning anger.
She forbade our going out: we never can
Escape her watchful eyes and sally out;

And he and you now cannot meet at all
And I cannot help to keep your love alive
By fixing trysts. Your love will languish now
And you will wither in cheerless loneliness.
How I pity the love you bear for him,
And you in torment!

35

A panegyric of a Chērā king:

Numberless are the fierce battles
Kuttuvan, the mighty, fights;
And endless the gifts of pachyderms
The poets receive from the triumphant king,
—Elephants captured from the fleeing foemen!
Endless so are the paeans of praise
Which lovely maidens, while dancing, sing,
Lit by the tall lamps fed with ghee
Unendingly in the streets where flags
Stream in the wind like waterfalls
That cascade down the slopes of mountains.
Endless, indeed, are the songs of praise
On the mighty deeds of *Kuttuvan*,
That resound in the streets of the ancient towns.

36

A panegyric on a king by a poet sung in response to the remark of the king that the poet's arm was thin and weak:

It's your right arm
That urges on
Gigantic elephants
Carrying a ram
To batter the doors
Of enemy fortresses.
With these arms,
O mighty monarch,
You hold the reins
That keep in check
Your spirited horse
When it over-leaps
The yawning moats
Around the forts
Of enemy kings.
It is, O king,
Your right arm, scarred
By the bowstring, pressing,
That speeds the arrows
To your foemen arrayed.
But again they start
To operate,
These arms of yours
When you descry
Penurious poets.
They give away
Without respite
Presents of gold
And rice and meat
Finely flavoured

With ghee and spices.
Your arms, O king,
Are strong as steel
To accomplish these
Deeds of valour
And of philanthropy.
Mine—they are weak,
The arms of a poet
Nourished for long
With your loving care
Saved from danger
Protected from
All privations
By the dauntless valour
Of your sinewy arms.

37

The friend of the girl speaks to the boy at the moment the boy and the girl are set for elopement:

So you are set on your chosen course!
You love her with a love that passes bounds
And she, like the faith of the *Chōlā* king
In the javelin proffered by his friend
Pazhaiyan, the lord of *Pēr* abounding
In elephants with gleaming silver tusks,
Has now reposed her simple faith
In your words, O chief of the village
Green with bowers variegated
By blooming flowers of rainbow colours!
Live up to your words! Stand by her
When the rolling years undermine
Her beauty, when her upstanding breasts
Slacken and her glossy tresses
Now black like bees are shot with grey.
Do not let your present love
Grow cold when age advancing steals
Her inebriating comeliness:
She needs you then as you need her now!

38

The girl to her friend, in the hearing of the boy:

With all this rain the tiny rills in the hill
Flooding, had formed cataracts and flowing down
United into a single stream: it flowed on
Sedately on its wooded way, a lovely spectacle.
But the sight of the lovely stream put in my mind
The hill from which it takes its birth and thence
Its chieftain and his cruelty, his failure to keep
His tryst of the other day: I wept: my tears
Would not cease. Mother saw me, hurried up
And spoke sweetly tender words: 'Dearest! Why these tears?
Who caused you distress? Let me kiss your teeth!'
Made reckless by my mood and all this tenderness
I almost blurted out the fatal words of truth,
'It's all due to the chief of the hill where the bee
Drunk deep of *kāntaḷ* honey sings sweetly on
The summit reaching up to yonder sky; it's he
That causes all this heart-ache to his girl!'
With fearsome restraint I kept a hold on me.
I do not know how long I can, my dear,
Restrain this mad impulse to speak the truth
And ruin everything!

39

The friend of the girl speaks:

Get up dearest, let us go to watch the fields.
Stem the tears, do not weep, for tears can undermine
Your enchanting beauty. Above all, do not, dear,
weep
In front of all these others, it might start
A scandal in the village. Your eyes are shot
With a comely red like the deadly arrow drawn
From the pigs that trespass into the millet fields
To forage on the rip'ning grain—the arrow shot by
hunters
And drawn out from the dying brutes in ruthless
unconcern.
Let us hurry: for I hear pirate parrot flocks
All unconscious that the peacock in the cage
Is standing witness, crop the millet ears—
Daring thieves in merry plume, the dark green of the
body
Set sharply off by the deepest crimson of their beaks.
Their stealth is out, the peacock knows, it is no secret
still!
Let us go and drive them off: do not weep, my dearest!

Indian critics could see a veiled reference to the friend of the girl having come to know the secret love between the two, in the passage where the peacock is said to be witness to the depredations of the parrots.

40

A mother to a girl making enquiries about her son:

Grasping hold of the pillar, friend,
You want to know where my son may be.
In truth I do not myself know:
He seldom stays at home with me.
He regards me that brought him forth
Even as the tiger, the stony cavern
Where it tarries for the day
Leaving it when the shadows fall,
Has no feeling nor sentiment
For the hole in the rock that gave it shelter
For the space of but a single day.
Go and seek him in a field of battle,
Seek him where the fighting rages
At its thickest: you may find him there!

41

The friend of the girl speaks:

It is true he failed to keep his tryst
But you seem to take it hard, assuming
That love is cold in him, that never will he come:
And how you dread the wagging tongues of village gossips!
And so despairing, dear, you waste away;
You look to me like a wreath of flowers in bloom
Now cast aside and fading; dearest, do not grieve
For his heart is tender, on his own he never will
Cause you needless anguish; it must be
That though he burns to be with you, my dear,
He finds he cannot come to you in secrecy
With all these guards: the nights are bright with moonlight.
I have heard him tell his charioteer
To keep a watch for reckless crabs that dart
In the path of the moving chariot wheel; such compassion
Will not let him see you suffer. He will watch
And when the time's propitious he shall come
To make the fading bloom come surging back to you!

42

The friend of the girl speaks to her in the hearing of her parents:

I hear talks of your wedding, dear;
I see strangers beating a path
To our home for talks with father.
How I loathe this! Months ago
Came a hunter, the chief of the hills
Where natives digging the rocky earth
For edible tubers uncover gems
Of the purest water—he came pursuing
Some beast of the jungle up to our fields
And found you guarding the ripening millet.
Love was born that moment—stroking
Your glossy tresses, he exclaimed,
'You shall come as my chosen bride
To my mountain home when you reach the age
Of consent!' Where has the hunter gone?
The talk of your wedding from these alien mouths
Fills our minds with endless longing—
Where does he live, O tell me dear,
The hunter from the distant hills,
The caressor of your glossy tresses?

43

The girl speaks:

None but me is in this plight!
Do you remember the youthful hunter
The chief who rules over the enchanted hill
Where all through the day one can hear
Orchestrated strains of music
All unprogrammed—the wind that blows
Through bamboo holes provides the flute
The constant hum of the bees, the lyre
With the waterfalls keeping time?
The lord of such delightful country
Walked in one day, bow in hand
Bent on picking the elephant's trail
Right where we stood, the bevy of girls
Told off to guard the millet standing.
They all saw him, the guarding girls
But none of them is any the worse
For having set their eyes on him:
They scarce remember meeting him!
But I—your luckless friend—I saw
And fell for him and from that day
I toss in my bed, my pillow wet
From the stream of tears that flows unchecked
All through the night, while the whole world sleeps.
None but me in all the village
Is in this plight—I am singled out
Marked by a ruthless fate to grieve
Unredeemed.

44

I would my days are n't frittered away
In the company of faint-hearted men
Who are rather like rats which, in fretful fever
Rush about in fields of grain
Cropping the sheaves of golden corn
To fill their warrens, covetous men
Of a grasping mind who consider
Security and a care-filled prudence
As the lodestar of their anxious lives.
There then are these tiger-men.
At night-fall the tiger wakes up hungry
Emerges from its mountain cave
And luck is in its favour! For, to its left
It finds a wild pig lying dead
Killed by an unknown predator.
Driven by hunger, does it break its fast,
Does the tiger bolt the welcome food?
The food is unfit for a tiger's dinner
For was it not found to the tiger's left?
In proud disdain it marches on
Its roars echoing through the mountain caverns
And later in the night it meets an elephant,
A mighty tusker, the king of the herd,
Kills him in a bloody, hard-fought battle
And dines in royal splendour on
The hard-earned meat, the spoils of war!
Such men of courage who repudiate
Easy short-cuts in their triumphant march
Through life's snags—undaunted men
Who face the future with a defiant mien
For whom security is effeminate
Fit for the mean, the feeble-hearted.
May all my future days be spent
In such indomitable company,
In the company of such tiger-men!

45

The girl speaks:

You plead for him! you beseech me
To take him back, to welcome him
Besmirched as he is back to my house!
It's true he gave me joy profound
Before he was trapped by her coquetry.
But you seem to forget the pain, the heart-ache
I have suffered at his callous hands.
We see, in season, in the leafy meadow
The tiny bloom of the *nerunji* plant—
Distilled joy to the beholder—
But set with thorns, envenomed,
Which hurt the finger that plucks the flower:
His love like the blossom, set with thorns
Is at once a source of bliss and pain—
Present pain at his broken troth
Shot through with gleams of remembered bliss,
Of affection recollected.

46

The friend of the girl speaks:

Welcome, the foot-loose! your wedded wife
Whom you have treated with such ill grace
Extends her welcome to you returning
After months of straying, now home to her.
For she cannot live without you, apart
Whatever the heart-ache you cause in her.
You must have seen the *neidal* plant
Growing wild in the paddy fields,
Blooms and all, cut off by the farmers
And thrown out on the ridges to fade.
But from the root it gains a foothold
In the self-same field: it does not feel,
'I shall not trespass where I am not wanted!'
It needs the field, it has no life
Apart from that: your lady-love
Needs you likewise for her sustenance;
However deep you pierce her heart
With the javelin thrusts of your faithlessness
She cannot help loving you still,
You still are the factor, the only reason
For which she lives!

47

A familiar sight for those of your citizens
That live in your splendid capital town
Who visit the tank in the middle of the day,
A sight at once to rouse their wonder
And their love, their tenderness
Is that of your mighty elephant
Your royal caparisoned pachyderm
Now bereft of all its accoutrements
Lying abject on the bank of the tank
While the smallest children of the neighbourhood
Give it a bath: they wash its tusks
White and gleaming with their tiny hands
They walk all over the mighty brute
With no tremors—for the giant reposes
Enjoying all these ministrations
Of its puny attendants.
But make no mistake! When the drums of war
Resound through the streets of your capital town
This same elephant can sally forth
And decimate the ranks of your enemy king
None of whom can stand in the path
Of the mighty avenger. You are, O king
Like the tusker bathed by tiny children,
The butt of the whims of the poets of your court
Who can and do take liberties
Even with the person of their royal patron;
But like the same brute in times of war
You strike terror in the hearts of your foes,
A pitiless avenger!

48

The girl speaks

Your waves with the crest of foam
White like the *tāzhai* bloom
Dash endless all the day
And all through the endless night,
Against his far-flung shore
Where flocks of silvern gulls
Feast on the teeming fish.
Your lament, O sea, is heard
Unremitting all the day
And all through the silent night.
You suffer, restless sea,
From separation—pangs!
I know the malady:
You too are doubtless smitten!
To whom have you lost your heart?
Whose love does make you grieve,
That you keep me company
Unwinking all the night?

49

Of what avail is untold wealth
And the widest circle of friends with whom
One can feast all the days of the year?
Of what avail, if, while they feast
The child of the house does not totter in
Stretching his tiny hand to pick
The littlest fistful of cooked rice
Laced with liberal ghee, at random
From one of the plates of the surprised guests,
Tasting some but mostly applying
The greasy rice all over his body
And moving on, he does not put
His dirty hand in other plates
To mix the food, an epitome
Of enchantment that delights the guests
The victims of all his wantonness?
Of what avail indeed is life
That is rich with all the worldly goods
Which men covet, if it be barren,
If such life is not lighted up
By the playful caprice, by the wanton antics
Of these beguiling enchanters?

50

The mighty *Sezhiyan* has come to battle!
After a ritual bath in the sacred pool
Of the coolest water hard by the gate
Of his hoary city, he decked himself
With the leaves of the neem tree, as laid down
In the hoary canons of the art of war
And with the wardrums beating afore
He comes to the field in the attitude
Of a devotee going to a temple of God
In the mien of worship! His foemen ranks,
How may of them are ranged before him!
It may happen that some of them
May, perhaps, leave the field of battle
At the setting of the sun, still alive:
For the day is too short for even him
The avenging *Sezhiyan* to decimate
All of them that are arrayed against him!
It's possible that some of them
Escape his wrath to tell the tale
Of the holocaust on this fateful day!

51

The girl speaks:

After the showers, the first of them
Heralding the rainy season
I heard noises in the morning
Of farmers now in the best of spirits
Going forth to their fields to sow
And returning home when the sun goes under,
Their tiny baskets, filled in the morning
With the seed to sow, now full with flowers—
Full with the whitest *mullai* blossom—
The village now is filled with the bustle
Of the happy farmers at the end
Of a fruitful day of labour done.
I hear such sounds. The only sound
I do not hear is that made by
The rows of bells in his chariot
Speeding through the verdant jungle
On his way home back to me
To keep his plighted word.

52

The prostitute speaks:

He is easy-going: even his pleasures
He does not seek: they should come to him.
Do not the fish in his paddy fields
Get the luscious fruit of the mango tree
Gifted to them by the summer sun
Which makes it fall right into their mouths?
He is so, has always been.
When he left my house, he swore by all
He held dear that he would prove
Faithful to me and to my love.
Now he has gone and got himself
Under the thumb of the woman he has wed
The mother of his child, the queen of his house.
He now functions just as her slave;
Nay, he amounts to nothing more
Than the image reflected in the mirror in the wall,
The image which follows faithfully
All the gestures of the person before,
Having no will or urge of its own.
He has gone right out of my life
He is hers; he is lost for ever!

53

The friend of the girl speaks:

When your hill-folk long for rains
The clouds, unfailing, send down showers
That sustain their crops of millet.
Everywhere in your high domain
You can find signs of the cloud's compassion;
But why do you, O chief of the hills
Prefer this secret, risky courtship
To an open wedding? For, if you have
A little pity for the girl you love,
You can stench the flow of her tears.
Whenever she sees the tiny rivulet
Swollen by the rains to a roaring torrent
Cascading down as a streak of white
Against the background of the blue-black hills,
It stirs her up from the depth of her being
Her grief gets sharpened, poignant;
Unremitting tears cascade down
Her fleshless face: there's no stopping them!
Chieftain, you lack the pity the clouds
That settle on your hill-tops shower!
The farmers in your rocky land
Are quite fulfilled. O when shall she
The light of your life ever fulfilled be?

54

The girl speaks:

You mean well, when you assure me
That he shall yet come back to me.
But, my dear, you fail to see
He should have been back: he is overdue.
His promised date of returning
Indeed is past. My senses all
Indicate that. For I can hear
The thunder claps heralding now
The onset of the rainy season.
The rain god like a bitter foe
Bends his multi-coloured bow
At me from the heavens. The evening
All determined to make me grieve
Sets the stage: for don't you hear
The songs on the make-shift cowherds' flutes
That call the cattle through the dusk
Of the meadow white with the *mullai* bloom
And the cows agog to see their offspring
Lowing as they homewards speed
And the restless calves all straining at
The slender cords with which they are tied,
To rejoin their mothers—for,
Have they not been from their mothers
Parted all the day?

55

The girl speaks:

With the water ebbing in the creek
Even the restless sea is silent.
I feel sure, with the lullaby
Sung by the bees from the *punnai* blooms
And the dragonflies in unison,
The sea sleeps on like *Thirumāl*
Put to sleep with the strains of the lyre.
Everything is in restful slumber.
But my restless mind! You labour on!
In the pervading gloom you seek to find
The heartless one who fanned in you
This love-disease that defies all
Attempts at therapy—how ceaselessly
You seek, O mind; did you ever find
Whom you seek in the leafy thickets,
Could you meet him, O mind of mine?

(2)

In the gathering dusk where shoals of sharks
The killer fish mount a ruthless guard
Over the deep-blue creek, you wander, mind,
Seeking him that gave you this
The love-disease that is past enduring.
You longed to fold him in tight embrace;
Were you fulfilled, O mind of mine?

(3)

At eventide when flocks of birds
Come to roost in the copse of trees

Along the salt creek, you went about
In search of him on whose account
You suffer and this body gets
Emaciated, wastes away
(My bangles slip—they will not stay)
You wished to know how you stood with him.
Could you divine his deepest thoughts,
Could you read him, O mind of mine?

(4)

Your lot, my mind, is one deserving
The deepest pity: for long and hard
You seek the one that injured you
That fanned up all this conflagration.
You seek the villain all the day
You seek him all the endless night
Even like the ebb and flow
Of the restless water in the creek.
Yours were the toil and the tears
Yours were the pain and the fatigue of the search;
You hungered for a love—amalgam
You panted for a merger with the faithless one.
Could you run down the fugitive?
Could you secure it, O mind of mine?

56

The mighty world rolls on, is kept alive, fulfilled
Through the power of the soul of selfless men—who prefer not
To savour the best of life's blessings, the rarest food of the Gods
Alone, by themselves: who love to share it with those that have it not,
Who abjure anger and the panicky fear that urges men
Of common mettle to compromise, to treat with what is evil,
Who lay down their lives for a noble cause which shall emblazon
Their fame in letters of burnished gold through epochs yet unborn,
Who do not barter their fame away for all the gold and wealth
The world can proffer—tireless toilers for the common weal
Whose only thought is to wipe a tear from the shrunken face of grief
With hearts untainted by a love of self—it is such men
From whose deep-down moral taproots steady runs the sap
To sustain life.

57

The boy speaks:

You think it is easy for me to wed her
How wrong you are! For I dread to touch her
In the secret tryst to which we go
With palpitating heart. Her brothers
When on their hunt, they see a deer
Draw red blood by pelting stones
They segregate it from the rest of the herd,
Give it hot chase without respite
Its mate distracted keeping close
To her lord in the hour of its direst peril;
And when they come within striking distance
They bend their bow and speed an arrow
With a terrific bang; it strikes the deer
In its genitals; the luckless victim
Falls to the ground; her brothers pluck
The lethal arrow smeared with blood
Without a thought of the blinding pain
Caused to the stag in its dying moments
And the mental torture of the faithful doe.
Such are her kinsmen; how can I hope
For a happy sequel? Indeed, my friend
How does this incipient, hesitant love
Get started on its stormy course?
You counsel confidence; how dare I hope
For the hand of the girl from the pitiless clan?
How dare I hope she will entertain
The tender passion? And if she does
How do I seek her hand in marriage
From her sadist kinsmen athirst for blood?

58

The girl speaks:

The village street resounds with the scandal!
If I loathe it, if I panick
My love for him shall wither away.
But dear friend! if I ignore all
These village gossips, my bashfulness—
Of all I have, the highest prized,
The highest treasured in a girl's heart
Shall run dry—how sad my plight!
On that fateful day in the secret bower
Our love zoomed and he gobbled up
My virgin splendour—now I am
Like a broken tree with its hanging branch
Not quite touching the ground underneath,
More dead than living, pitied by all
Broken in hunger in a heedless rampage
By the lusty bull of an elephant.

59

The boy speaks:

I went leaving behind in the village
What I valued more than my life
I left you dear, for foreign climes
To earn such wealth as would far surpass,
The wildest dreams of avarice.
But could I tarry so long, dear
In far off lands to fulfil my dreams?
No! I have come back as you see
With little wealth, I was drawn to you
Pulled as it were by the thongs of love
Laced with gold such as would bind
Rich men's pets, the pachyderms—
Pulled to your presence by your matchless worth
Through the burning deserts where the traveller
Bewildered, often loses his way
Confused by the forking paths
To perish of thirst or at the cruel hands
Of bands of brigands that prowl the sands.
I have come back to you with little wealth.
I could not tarry to garner more
I could not wait to take my leave
Of the people there, with whom I worked.
I have come flying in my chariot
Powered by my love for you!
For wealth can be gathered at a later age
But love is for youth and youth is fleeting!

60

The mother speaks:

I had been nursing, in my ignorance
The notion that my daughter is
Too young to feel the pangs of love
But she felt otherwise, the comeliest girl
In all this village; she set her heart
On eloping with the one she loves
Certain that the step conforms
Fully to the moral law
And last night left her home and me
With her brave young man to cross the desert—
Rainless tracts where peacocks dance
When robber bands beat the drum,
Mistaking drumbeats for thunderpeals;
Let there be rains to-day in them,
Out of season, cooling down
The fiery sands on which my girl
Shall wend her way with the youth she loved.
Let it rain in the desert tracts
Where she walks in step with him—
To be with whom she forsook home
She left behind her bosom friends,
She repudiated even me!

61

The friend of the girl speaks:

If one stays for too long a time in cool waters
In the bathing ghat, the eyes get red. If one tastes
The sweetest honey over a length of time, it turns sour
In the tongue of the taster. The greatest love, in the course of time
Does turn bitter. For months together you have kept away
Forsaking the wedded wife for the gilded charms
Of public women. If you harbour still in your mind
This passion for the harlots—in the name of one you have wronged
I beseech you to take her now, this instant straight to the home
Of her parents—the well-remembered structure in the street
Infested through with venomous serpents, which once she willingly
Gave up to savour the lasting joys of the married state,
For the sake of a future that did seem so full of rosy bliss
And now is not.

62

The friend of the girl speaks:

The waves of the sea with foamy crests
White like the hair of aging men
Dashing, crush into shapeless sand
The mud homes sculpted by girls at play.
On this shore did bloom your love
And from the few who were in on this
The many learnt and gossip wove
A nightmare tale of secret meetings
Growing as it went the rounds
Till mother heard it and hit the roof
And in towering rage forbade the girl
From moving about at liberty:
She is a prisoner in her own home!
She pines for you through the endless day
And all through the endless night.
I know you love her, I know you long
To press her heaving bosom tight
To your hero's chest: I haven't the heart
To counsel you to forget her
To divert your love in other channels.
From certain signs, chieftain, I gather
You plan to leave for distant lands
To garner wealth which you will, doubtless place
Before her parents as the price of the bride.
If such be your mind, forsake the plan
For, whom you love can well be yours
If you ask for her hand in all candour,
Of her father, if mustering courage
You talk to him as man to man.
But if you want, youthful chieftain
To earn and pay the price of the bride

If you plan with gold to buy her,
Not all the wealth of the *Kōsar* city
Whose noisy streets are frothy rivers
Through which flows the flood of commerce
Can buy my friend from off her parents!

63

The friend speaks:

You long to meet her, son of the chieftain of fertile
seashore lands
In secret tryst, prizing the thrill of the blessed golden
moment
When you come together; remember, friend, this union
is transient,
Of the moment, does not last. When, O when will you
Seek her hand in sacred wedding and make a secure
home,

For her to savour all the bliss of a fulfilled wedded life?
In your realm you see the gull at eventide fly back
To where the yellow *thāzhai* blooms. The doting
mother gull
Mistakes a bud for its own offspring and tenderly proceeds
To feed the fish; and when it finds the chick refuse
The proffered food, the mother bird disinclined herself
To gobble up the tasty morsel, stood in tender love
Protecting the *thāzhai* bud from the rays of the ruthless
sun
By opening her feathered wings. Such moving scenes,
O chieftain
Of homely love in your own land—don't they urge you on
To seek her hand in holy wedlock, that the girl you love
so well
May get in time to savour this, the joy of a happy home
Resounding to the playful patter of little restless feet?

64

The girl speaks:

He does not come: I pine away
With a grief that feeds on my living flesh.
But still I think he shall come to me
His heart is tender. In his mountain slopes
The monkey cubs having feasted on
The luscious fruit of the jack-tree feel
The need for a drink. They descry cows
Cud-chewing in the shade of trees
Lying down. They repair to them
And gently press their udders. The cows
Do not drive the audacious cubs
Away with a swish of their hairy tails
But gently let the sweet milk flow
Which the grateful brigands receive in the hands
Spread out together and lap it up.
He cannot be a stranger to the tender passion,
A daily witness to such scenes of grace
Even in the lower, the brute kingdom.
How can he stay for long away?
How can he dismiss my anguish, my heart-ache?
I still think he shall come to me,
Back from his wanderings, home to me.

65

The bed was empty, the war drum taken out
For its ritual bath — the glistening drum of war
Bound tight with thongs and decked with the golden bloom
Symbol of awful battles. The bed, the sacred seat
Of the drum of war lay before me empty, inviting.
I was fatigued, O king of kings, I did not realise
It is your drum's sacred sanctuary
I laid this weary frame of mine down on the sacred bed
And all unconscious of my heinous act fell fast asleep.
You came in, saw this affront to your martial fame;
Your instinct would have been to draw instantly your sword
And cut my body, prone in the bed in twain.
You fought it down, this first impulse to kill,
You went farther, noble monarch; taking up a fan
And standing near you fanned me all the while I slept!
You love Tamil, you worship poesy
You can forgive, O king of kings, all kinds of transgression
In votaries of creative art! your fame shall doubtless live
Disseminated in the world of men, in all loving zeal
By dilettantes of the highest sensibility
Who honour art, who place in high esteem
Things that nourish the mind and soul, the food of the inner man.
Epochs after you have passed on, your life's battles won,
To your worthy seat in the highest heaven, your fame shall live on
Green in the minds of the cognoscenti; they shall balladize
How you quelled your kingly ire against an erring poet
And how you served him, a famished bard, by waving a royal fan
The while he slept.

66

The friend of the girl speaks:

In the arid tracts where rains have failed
Herds of restless elephant calves
Emaciated, driven by thirst
Follow the shifting mirage. I learn
You plan to cross this flaming hell
In search of wealth. Pray, listen, friend,
With patience to these words of mine.
Preoccupied with your plans to go
You took up the bow of your own make
To test the tension, that the bow may serve
To keep off robbers in the trackless wastes.
But did you note how the moon of her face
Was covered that moment, by the cloud of pallor.
With the whip tied tight — a symbol of travel
Single-minded, you tested the tip
Of the arrows you have for fineness of point.
But did you notice how this tell-tale act
Made her eyes shed copious tears
Like the blue lotus blooms in the mountain pool
Exuding water after a bout of rain?
Bent on your project with scarce a thought
Of how your absence will affect the girl
You were engaged once in sharpening
The edge of the disc with which you won
Victories in the fields of battle.
But you failed to note the instant change,
The emaciation in the girl you love:
You did not see her bangles slip
And fall off her wrists like *kōdal* petals
Detached from their stalks by a steady breeze.
Such is her feeling, her plight when she sees

The preparations for your journey later.
Will she survive your actual leaving?
The instant she hears your words of farewell
And before you leave she is sure to die.
Now reflect well before you answer this:
What avails pelf? Will all the wealth
You earn in your stay in those distant lands
Buy back for you a fleeting moment
From out of your youth thus frittered away?
Can this wealth, too, buy back for you
The life of the girl that you sacrificed
At the blood-stained altar of prosperity?

67

The boy speaks:

My wayward mind, inconstant, prone to fly
From whim to whim, capricious tormentor!
You drive me mad, you sure shall lay me open
To public banter in my ruthless native village!
Not long ago you made me leave my girl
To go forth seeking wealth in distant climes:
You spoke enticing words in praise of wealth —
All the endless good that wealth can buy for me.
So I left her, the fairest maiden wrapped up all in me,
All alone in the teeming world, a hapless prey to grief.
Now I walk the pathless wastes of burning desert sands
And barren hills where prickly pebbles torment him that walks
At every tread — where from its perch on the leafless bough of a tree
The eagle lets out plaintive notes of unrequited love
Shrill, urgent notes to his distant mate through the arid desert air.
Recalcitrant mind of mine! you heard the strident call
Of the killer bird, the predator, the scourge of the desert skies.
If the gentle nudging of the tender passion can move his stony heart
It sure can move you — and it did; but the change was badly timed!
Having lured me on to travel with vaulting hopes of gold
Far from the girl on whom is centred all my inner being,
You hark back now, inconstant you, to loving thoughts of her

To those eyes that mock at flowers, drowsy-drunk with love,
Forsaking me to loneliness amidst these barren tracts.
You should have valued love, my mind, and not this tinsel wealth
Before this venture. Now to stop and trace my painful way
Back to the village with empty hands, the purpose unfulfilled
Will expose me to mockery: far better it would be
For me to court a painful death in the trackless desert wastes
Than to face the scornful words and the painful mocking laughter
And derisive looks and the sobriquet of the feckless never-do-well
From the spiteful village carpers.

68

If hard-pressed poets
Who all their lives
Have only known
The pangs of want,
Of deprivation
Happen to hear
Of a man of wealth
Who loves poets,
Eager they come
For largess to him.
And to give, O king,
Is easy enough.
What indeed is
Rare to find
Is discernment,
The calibre
To assay, measure
To plumb the depth
Of poetic genius
And give in step
With the measure of greatness.
This is the supreme
The acid test
Of patronage,
Not this, O king,
This indiscriminate
Distribution
Of money, presents
In equal measure
Amongst all comers.
Know this, O king
And you yet shall be
Immortalised

In song and ballad
As a gifted patron
Of the subtle art
Of creative poesy.

69

The friend of the girl speaks:

I grant you love her, chief of the hills!
But you don't see how she wastes away
With all this delay in your coming together
In holy wedlock: her love has grown
Almost too great for her slender frame
To contain it. Havn't you seen
Gigantic jack-fruits in your native hill
Hanging by their slender stalks?
A touch may fell them, the littlest breeze
A careless brush by a passing beast
May send them crashing down to the ground.
If you fail to secure her
Through a proper wedding, mountain chieftain,
The fruit of her love growing great
May well snap the slender stalk
Of her fragile life, crashing down,
A useless mass that will rot away
Unsavoured, unfulfilled.

70

A king grew suspicious of the intentions of a poet who had been to the court of his brother with whom he had a bitter feud: he thought the poet had come to spy on him, being in his brother's pay and decided to have him killed. A great poet, one of the greatest in all Sangam era sang this poem to dissuade the king from carrying out his terrible resolve and succeeded in his design.

Poets are a unique tribe!
Egged on by friendship and by a chronic want
They cross deserts, they travel far.
They study the flight of birds as omens
All to meet a patron of art
And spend the time in his company
Discoursing on the poetic merits
Of their newest brain-child. The patron listens
And overwhelmed by their poetic art
He smothers them with munificent gifts.
Do these poets with their memories fresh
Of an abject, lifelong penury
Save the gifts for a rainy day?
On the contrary: they live it up,
They enjoy the pelf, they share it alike
With all their penniless kith and kin.
They only care for words of praise
From mature men of discernment
From the dilettante of poesy.
They care nothing for the envious
For the courtiers who wish them ill
And so when these are looking on
They swagger forth in honest pride
Their innocent hearts overflowing
With benign bliss, with love for all.
Truly are the poets a unique tribe

In their gifts of bliss and of love
And the rarest gift — of independence:
Know this then, O mighty king —
They are as wealthy, they are as great
They are as noble as crowned kings
Poets like this are, in every way,
As high and mighty as kings like you!

71

You give without stint, O mighty king!
You give till it hurts! Your munificence
Which is justly famed is not a case
Of spiritual commerce! You do not wish
To acquire merit in after life
Through all these largesses you give away!
You give because your forebears gave,
You give because that's the only way
Men of the noblest mien react
Everytime they are face to face
With the fleshless visage of penury!

72

Chōla monarch! Your forebears ruled
Even over the wanton wind:
They could harness the wind's caprice
So to make it fill the sails
When their ships were becalmed in the seas!
Master of elephants, doughty, brave!
Extirpator of enemy ranks!
You triumphed over the *Chēra* king
In the bloody field of *Veṇṇi*! Doubtless
You are great! But, as I see it,
Greater seems the *Chēra's* fame!
To-day when you celebrate
Your signal triumph in the field of battle,
He sits refusing food and water
Facing north: for the mighty king
Has bound himself by the terrible vow
Of immolating his own body
To expiate the infamy
Of sustaining an injury
In his back in battle—a hero's bane!
Your feat of arms is great indeed
But greater seems the *Chēra's* valour
And brighter burns his hero's lustre!

73

Death has claimed him! How did it get him?
Not by nursing a burning vengeance,
Not by battle, by a feat of arms.
He could never have suffered defeat,
He never knew in all his life
What it is to surrender,
To bow in meekness before a mightier foe!
Death should have come as a suppliant,
Should have come to him as a famished bard
And asked as largess the king's own life.
Death could have got him in no other wise!

74

The girl speaks:

Who shall bear my message of love
The message damp with tears, but you!
Not the green glades not the *punnai* trees
Whose new-blown blooms are heavy with bees
Nor shall the salt — creek report my love
To the sea-shore chieftain: in his favoured land
The restless bees athirst to feed
On the golden dust of flowers seek
Till they find the dusky *neidal*
And settling on the full-blown petals
They gorge themselves on the golden pollen
Sweet as nectar: and inebriate,
They lie drowsy, their restless nature
Stilled for the moment: such is the land
He rules over! He seems to share
The helpless plight of these drunken bees!
For he too, drunk with a heady passion
For the painted women of easy virtue
Lies entangled in their glamourous coils.
None but you, O king of crabs
Can go to him and tell the tale
Of what I suffer on his account.
For, in the darkest hour of gloomy nights
When the seagulls sleep with their constant mates
Perched on the branches hanging low
Of the *thāzhai* trees that line the creek
And sleeping, dream of dining on
The white fish sweet and succulent
Far from their favourite hunting grounds
Where killer sharks abound — of nights
He came to the tryst and found in me

An arbour for his fevered heart
An anchorage for his restless soul.
O friendly crab, go, remind him
And seek from him that emollient
Which once I gave him, now for me;
Go, do not tarry, king of crabs,
Seek from the chief of the sea-shore village
The healing herb for my sundered heart!

75

Out of the kingdoms famed in song,
Three in number, whose martial prowess
Is proclaimed with the beat of drums,
The greatest is your *Chōlā* land,
Matchless with the abundant crops
Of stately sugarcane fed by the floods
Of the *Cauvery* river that never fails
Even if the sun doth change his course
And the planets swerve from their patterned orbits!
O proud king, that rule over this
The land of bounty, hearken to me!
Your forebears on the *Chōlā* throne
Were, like the deity of the moral order,
Passionately fond of justice
And a benign rule: well could they bring
Welcome showers for the thirsty land,
For what they willed did come to pass.
Know, O king! the towering white
Umbrella your minions hold,
The insignia of a mighty king
Is not meant to shield your person
From the inclemency of sun and rain
But symbolises your unique station
As the protector of the harassed people!
You love glory in the field of battle
You love the thrill, the risk and the triumph;
But wars are fought and wars are won
With the fruit of the farmer's ceaseless toil
From whence grow the sinews of war.
Where the peasants languish, the land decays,
And for the ruler and for the ruled
There cannot be the triumphs of war

There cannot be the boons of peace.
In the tradition of our hoary land
The people are prone to blame the king
When the monsoon fails and the spectre of drought,
The spectre of famine darkens the land
And things befall that are opposed to nature.
Realise your kingly duties,
Contemplate the role your peasants
Play in your country's economy
And look after their interests
With love and care and solicitude:
Discard, O king, the counsel proffered
By your mealy-mouthed courtiers
And tend the men that till the field
For, where peasants are happy blooms the land!

76

The friend of the girl speaks:

We learn you are planning to leave the town
And cross the desert for distant lands
Bent on making your pile. Have you thought
Of the effect it will have on the girl of your heart
—The girl who would feel a pang of fear
Shoot through her heart when you caress her
In tender love, when you display more
Of solicitude than is your wont —
She presumes that all this only means
You want to leave her, you are bent on travel?
You know how much you mean to her;
She has no life apart from you,
Jubilant, gay like the village when
It celebrates a feast, she looks
Cheerless like the village street
The day after the feast, forlorn, dull.
A lotus pond is a thing of beauty
With the full-blown blooms showing up.
But if, in the night, all the water
Drains off the pond, how hopeless, gray
The pond shall look? She is bound to be
Like the pond drained off if you part from her!
You are the smile on her ruby lips
You are the light of her lotus eyes.
Do not covet transient wealth,
It wastes away: youth's precious
And love is the goal of human life!
Spend all the golden hours of your youth
With the girl of your heart who yearns for you.
Sustain, my friend, by means of your love
The smile on her lips, the sparkle in her eyes!

77

A song of the meadows:

(**1**)

The clouds now dusty with their load of water drawn
From the sea rose high to the vaulting dome of the heavens
And sent down rains that nurtured all the lea
To make the *mullai* blossom forth in all
Its whitest splendour. Just when the sun was setting
Women of hoary age all from clans bespoke
With paddy and a basket full of *mullai* blooms repaired
To the temple, at the city's fringe; scattering grain and flower
On the sacred ground they lay in wait concealed
Alert for omens. They didn't have to wait for long
For hard by from a cowshed they could hear a girl
Comforting a calf in grief; stroking it, she said,
'Do not grieve! For even now your mother, homeward bound
Is coming with the home-sick cowherd, pressing on behind her!"
The matrons thought the words were an omen foretelling
The return of the pining girl's youthful lover soon
And they returned home to give the girl the welcome augury
'He shall return' solaced they the grieving girl,
'Having worsted all his foemen he shall come
Back to you! Do not grieve!' The girl herself, too woebegone
Would not listen and the flow of tears from her eyes
Continued unchecked; for down the rains had come
And still no signs of him to whom the girl had lost her heart.

(2)

While thus she fared what of the king
Who had left the city to fight his foemen?
His army had camped in a jungle cleared
Of shrubs and creepers. A thorny fence
Ran round the camp. In the central square
Elephants were kept tethered to pegs.
With solicitude they just had been
Offered bundles of sugarcane
With which were tied paddy sheaves
Interlaced with juicy leaves
To tempt the palate of pachyderms.
But disdainfully they refused to touch
This delicious fodder that had turned
Banal, dull and common place.
The keepers saw this snobbery
Made the sounds they understood
And pushed the fodder down their mouths.
In the midst of the huts where the soldiers lived
Protected by a fence of bows
Driven like pegs into the ground and tied
With ropes supported by a wall of shields
Was the king's residence with walls of cloth.
Comely girls with swords in the sash
Round their dainty waists went round
With torches mending the standing lamps
When the wicks burnt low, in the royal hut.
The giant bell with the hanging tongue
Had just tolled the midnight hour
When the aged guards with turbans tied
With their torsos covered by shirts, dripping
Dew drops like bowers of spreading creepers
Wind-tossed, dripping crops of dew
From their leaves and their silver bloom,
Loyal minions of the royal guard
Went sleepily on their nightly rounds.

Time keepers of a trustworthy bent
Who measure time by means of the water
That ascends into a small vessel
With a hole in the bottom and floating in
A bigger vessel filled with water
Approach the king and greet him thus,
'O king that go forth to rout your foes
All over the earth, the time as seen
By us in this!', in a reverent tone
Befitting of the king's men
Communicating with the king himself.
The Greeks with powerful frames enclosed
By a long shirt and by a swathing cloth
That was tightly worn, showing a tell-tale bulge
Where they kept their fearsome horsewhip
These fearless men had fashioned the tent
For royal use — an outer room
Leading to an inner where slept the king
Protected by Greek bodyguards
Who all were dumb, who ranged around
All the night, in a sleepless vigil
To protect the person of the king in bed.

(3)

All the time quite titillated by the prospect
Of a closely fought out battle in the morning
Rolled in bed the king unwinking all the night
Thinking thoughts of solicitude for his royal tuskers wounded
In whom, the pain they suffered now quite stifled in their hearts
The love they bore towards their mates pining in their stall,
Of the gallant men of his infantry who that day had repaid

The debt they owed him all their lives as their patron-
provider
By bravely fighting their bloody way to death in the
battlefield,
Of horses hurt by flying arrows with points sharp as hell
Which, with ears drooping moaned in pain, refusing
nutriment.
Thus some nights the king of the realm and marshal of the
forces
With one hand under the royal head and the other on the
mattress
Went sleepless filled with loving thoughts of anguished
men and beasts
That fought for him; again the king on many nights
could sleep
The sleep of peace after days of battle when the worsted
foemen ranks
Learnt to dread the beat of drums in the camp of the
triumphant king.
Meanwhile the wife in mental pain
Her mind racing in the wake of her lord
In her lonely state was tempted to seek
Relief in death from her endless anguish.
But wiser counsels prevailed — she knew
She should await for her lord's return
In patience. Checking the rolling bangles
From falling off her wrists thinned out
And sighing deeply, trembling like
A peacock shot with an arrow, wounded
Grievously and in mortal pain
She sat in a corner in her spacious house
Where in the open quadrangles
The rain drops merging from all the roof
Fall in cascades reminding her
That the time of his return was nigh, indeed
His coming back was overdue.
To her in such predicament

Came the sounds that filled her ears
As strains of the sweetest music — Her lord
After his triumph in the field of battle
Where his foemen, routed, gave up
All the land the king had coveted
And after the noisy celebrations
With the horn and the conch, and raising aloft
The flag of victory, sat in the chariot
That had played a daring part
In the recent combat, urging on
The speedy horses through the flowering woods.
Where the bluest *kāyā* and the golden *konrai*
And the white-petalled *kānthal̄* that opens like
The hand of man and the crimson *thōnri*
Filled the landscape — where, on the path
The deer with the twisted horns gambolled
Even while grazing, with their mates.
Her lover raced in his fleet chariot
Urged by the sight of clouds above
Showering rains on the sweeping meadows.
She heard the rattle of the speeding horses
As strains of music to her famished soul —
The strains of music that banished all
The lonesome blight of the hollow months.

78

A song of the Vaigai river:

(1)

Listen chieftain! The thirsty clouds
Drank up the water of the boundless sea
And laying siege to the mountain tops
They battered them with thunderclaps
Scattering rocks over the mountain sides.
Then came the rains: the ceaseless showers
Deluged all the thirsty land.
An elephant in impetuous rage
Had gored to death with its silver tusks
A pitiless panther; constant showers
Now cleansed the tusks that the blood had stained.
Goaded by the rains to a speeded growth
The woods were in bloom and the scent of the flowers
Blended with the bouquet of honey dripping
From the holes in the hives where bears had pillaged
And the smell exuding from the earth of the woods
When the first raindrops quenched the summer's thirst;
And the citizens of Madurai, your compeers
Revelled in the scents and the freshes in the river.
The racket made by the swirling waters
Dashing against rampart walls
Woke up all the city. Dazed
By the noise and the manner they had been
Wrenched from sleep, they hurried to dress
And men put on women's garlands
And the women, those that deck the men.
They mixed up horses and the bulls
Yoking them on to the wrong carriage
Some had yoked them without noticing

That there was no harness on the horses.
Thus they hurried in great confusion
Eager to bathe in the fragrant freshes
But only the early ones among them
And the adroit drivers made the river;
The rest, held up by the seething throngs
Found themselves still far away
From their cherished goal, the bank of the river.

(2)

There on the bank
Stood bevies of girls
Admiring the gold
Ornaments on
Each other's person.
In a matter of moments
A girl became
The focal point
Of dirty looks
And accusations.
For on her person
Were discovered
(Shameful treachery!)
The ornaments
Which once were worn
By another woman
A paragon
Of chastity.
Her friends inferred
They had been given
To the courtesan
By the faithless husband.
They tormented her
With winged words.
The throng of women

Looked on in derision
And the courtesan
Shamed by the public
Chastisement
Quickly side-stepped
Away from the hot spot
And got lost in the crowd,
While the amorous youth
Stood, guilt written
All over his person.
And the friends of his wife
More ruthless than
The person wronged
Gave the freest vent
To their outraged feelings
Through words and looks
All aimed at him,
The philanderer,
His guilt exposed.
The friends of the wife
Not content with
Upbraiding him
Went forth in numbers
Seeking the woman
Fleeing their wrath
In the crowded bank.
The courtesan
Shrewd, adroit
Too quick for them
Eluded them
For a certain time
Using the throng
To 'scape detection.
But the ruthless girls
Pressed on, regardless
Till a sharper-eyed

One among them
Describe the fugitive.

(**3**)

The harlot, feeling now
Her game was up, decided
To bluster her way out
Of trouble, boldly faced them
Could even muster courage
To ask them 'Why do you
Keep after me?' The wife
Unconscious had followed
On the heels of her furious friends
Was stymied now at this
The brazen question flung
Bang at their startled faces
By the woman of easy virtue.

(**4**)

One of the girl's friends, more impetuous
Descended to raillery
And the courtesan paid it back in kind
And the exchanges for a while
Were even. A friend of the betrayed wife
Noting her discomfiture
Was stirred to the heights of eloquence
And raved at the harlot thus:
'You dangle sex before men of amour
Painted all the brighter
By endless falsehood and delude them!
Depraved woman! You live
By selling your sacred womanhood
In auction, to the highest bidder
Your mouth is like the trough of food

Rimmed by ruddy lips
At which the lecherous swine of men
Feed in carnal greed!
You make bulls of faithless men
And harness them to the plough
With ropes of sexy sidelong glances
From your handsome roving eyes,
To the plough of pleasure that inebriates
Even like the foaming toddy
Mature, fermented, mixed with water
To cloud the mind of man,
And how you drive them, your human bulls
How hard they pull the plough!
You know how if a farmer's bull
Is missing from his stall
We seek him out and secure him
By threats and beatings too
With the whips (of garlands) which we wear
And bring him to this bank
To bend the foot-loose, wayward brute
By main force to our will;
We never give up and you know it well;
So we claim our bull!
Wanton braggart! Listen now
You still can salvage some
A little part of your floundering womanhood
By begging her forgivance
By begging pardon from this idol
Of the noblest wifely virtue
By the thought of whom the world of men
Can cleanse their hearts of sin!'
But the brazen harlot, unrepentant
Had still a lot to say;
Challenged by the wedded wife
She claimed that her paramour
Gave her the jewels she displayed now,
As the price of her comely graces

And in her price of youth and glamour,
Of seductive coquetry
She said, 'Your husband loves me so
He shall take the tinkler
From off your feet and hand it to me
If I demand it, too!
Go and ask him about your jewels
He is the theif, not me!
I do not steal! I demand them
And get them too, remember,
As the rightful price for my comely graces!'
And still she had a lot to say.

(5)

The girls around them now set about
Making peace between the two
To the public woman they spoke in peace,
'The ornaments which their paramours
Give them become the property
Of women such as you: keep them all!'
But to their friend, the wedded wife
They spoke tender words of solace.
'Men go astray: they get enmeshed
In the charming web of courtesans
But the wife at home can never have
A life apart from the roving husband.
She cannot reject him, deny him
Entry into her sacred hearth.
He may have brought her nothing but pain
But her highest norms of chastity
Make her patient, prompt her even
To revere him that trod her love
Under his callous, disdainful feet.
For the love of the pure such as you

Transcends all the common values
Of selfish seeking, of getting even!
Such love laughs at transgressions
It's untainted, pure, it lasts for ever!'

(6)

Madurai is the city,
My friend, the chieftain,
Redolent with flowers.
The trees and the creepers
And the bushes verdant
Are full of blooms
At the time of the freshes.
The current of the floods
Takes all the blossoms;
The many waterways
Crisscrossing the city
All carry the diverse
Many — splendoured blooms.
Like a massive elephant
Holding its trunk aloft
To send a shower of water,
The *Vaigai* spreads afar
Its fragile load of flowers.

(7)

The season of the freshes in the *Vaigai* river
Is near at hand, my friend — the season
When those whose hearts have fused in love
Seek fulfilment in togetherness:
Or keep away in the course of tiffs
Which accentuate the thrill of union.
The freshes and the flowers — O what a back-drop
For the all-absorbing game of love!

How can you, friend, keep away from
The river and the town at this season?
Do you not feel a propelling urge
To drop whatever you may be doing
And scud to the town where things are happening?
Do you not feel, friend of my boyhood,
An overpowering need to be
In the town of Madurai and in the midst
Of this feast of love that titillates
The mind and the senses and sends the blood
Tingling through the youthful veins
Where, to be alive and young is the highest summit,
The ultimate in beatitude?

79

NONE BUT THE BRAVE DESERVES THE FAIR

(1)

The meadows are green with the generous showers,
The deep green set off by the many-hued flowers —
The golden *konrai* and the blood-red *thōnri*
And the *kāya* blue like the cloudless sky.
This is the season when the cowherds play
This is the time when they fight the bulls
To tingle the blood of the spectators,
To win the hand of the cowherd girl
And notch their name in the Hall of Fame
By fearless feats in the jaws of death
Braving the horns of the charging bull
Maddened into a murderous rage
By rapier thrusts that bring the blood
Gushing forth: this is the time
When wives are won and lives are lost,
The merriest day, the maddest hour
When the heady wine of bloody battle
And the headier wine of a damsel's love
Goes to the heads of the youth of the village
Who, all through the dreary banal months
Had been living for just this moment
To be gored to death by a maddened bull
Balladized by the girls of the village
Or emerge a hero to marry the girl
That rules his heart, as the matchless trophy.

(2)

The ring fills up with snorting bulls
And the makeshift galleries all around,
With the doe-eyed daughters of doughty cowherds
And even now, before the start of the fight
How excited are the brawny youth,
How restless are the killer bulls!
Ruddy-eyed and foamy-mouthed
The brutes strike terror as they scamper
And raise the dust with cloven hooves.
All are tensed up! Amidst the din
The leading cowherd from his lofty perch
Loud proclaims and all those gathered —
The boys and the girls — drink in his words
As if on them their lives depend:
'The one that tames this irate bull
Black of hue and black of heart
Shall wed this maiden of lovely tresses!
The youth that can by might of arm
Control this bull and ride it round —
This brute with ruddy blazing eyes —
Shall wed this girl with the doe-like eyes.
The brave one that with courage fights
And contains the rage of this tawny-skin
Can claim the hand of this matchless girl
With shoulders rounded like a highland bamboo!
Only the brave shall wed the fair!'
He identified the savage bulls
That must be fought and overcome
To gain the hand of comely maidens.
The proclamation sent the hearts
Of the boys and the girls madly racing.
The cowherds goaded the restless bulls
The youths picked out their chosen ones
And the fray began! O what courage
Resided in those youthful shoulders,

What reckless slaughter marked the ring!
As tension mounted, a raging bull
Charged madly at its tormentor
And gored him deep with its javelin-horns
And decked round the neck with his entrails ran
The gamut of the grounds in gory triumph.

(3)

The powd'ry dust,
Pall-like, covered
The battling pairs
Of bull and man.
And in the midst
Of deafening din
Horns and hands
Severed, fell:
Bubbling blood
With the dust combined
Into viscous mire.
Man and bull
Slipped and fell
On the miry ground
Still locked in combat.
Nerves on edge
Sat the girls
Their gusty spirits
Zooming up
Or crashing down
As their lovers
Stood up bravely
Gainst the charging bull
Or capitulated
Overcome
By a vengeful brute.

(4)

'Look at that son, the intrepid son
Of the neighbouring cowherd,' a girl cried out,
'See how he seizes a tenacious hold
Of the horns of the raging killer bull
On which he is seated — a precarious perch!
And the monster now with its ebbing strength
Tries all it can to push him down
And trod on him and gore him to death.
But he is made of sterner stuff
He will not leave the baiting ground
Without destroying its pride of valour.
He looks to me in this avenging mood
Like Lord Siva who made the god of death
Cringe before him in craven fear!'
'Look at that bull!' cried another girl
Pointing a tensed-up finger,
'When the reckless youth at whom it charged
Fell down slipping on the blood-soaked ground
I thought surely it was the end of him;
But wonder of wonders! For the savage brute
Disdaining to trod on the fallen foe
Walks quickly away leaving the youth
Unharmed: does not the bull display
The forbearance of the proper soldier
Who disdains to slay his foe
Unless he is able to defend himself,
Who thinks the killing of a fallen man
Is an act of moral cowardice
A piece of meanness repudiated
By the code of honour in a battlefield?'

(5)

The cowherd lasses
Are haughty snobs:

Only the hand
That catches hold
Of a pair of horns
Red with the blood
Of combatants
Can hold his girl
In a tight embrace.
Not for her is the cowardly youth
Who, when a bull that is mad with rage
Charges at him with the speed of wind
Does not stand his ground but flees
In craven panic with only the thought
Of saving himself, who fails to see
That life must end in certain death,
Who dreads to meet the charging bull
To quell its might and wed the girl
Of glossy tresses and moist eyes
Or die a hero, balladized
By the comeliest girls of the cowherds' village.

(6)

'The one that rules my heart'
Cries a love-inebriate,
'How brave he was to-day
How with a reckless courage
That defied certain death
He quelled the monster bull!
To him my eager kinsmen
Betrothed me to-day
Thus faunting the village gossips
Whose ceaseless tongues shall have
Respite from to-day!'
'But who are these kinsmen to betroth me
To the cowherd lad to-day?
The day he sprang without a thought

Betwixt the horns of the bull
The fate-filled moment he leapt upon
The back of the vengeful brute
Was the moment when my loving heart
Coalesced into his!'

(7)

The day has mellowed out to a cool, pleasant evening.
The torrid fights are over: a peace now settles on
The baiting grounds — The bulls have long been led away.
The thirsted trophies won, the youths in gay disdain
Of their bleeding wounds lead their blushing girls
To the verdant *mullai* bowers: the girls now set to music
Their morning's deeds of valour amidst the killer bulls:
The heroes of the day now step in tune with this
Locked in tight embrace with the girls that rule their hearts.

All is gaiety: the blossom-scented lea
Is filled with rosy fancies light as thistledown.
Now all is song and dance and lovers holding hands:
Tender love and laughter dispel the afternoon's
Savage vengeful rage, severed limbs and blood
The cry of anguished pain, the hush of sudden death.

80

Where is my valour, my fearless might
My foes learnt to dread in every fight?
From the moment I saw her my mind has been filled
With nameless fears which cannot be stilled.
The fire of my nature seems totally
Quenched by her fluid propensity.

81

The village gossips' endless whispering
And mother's anger cannot quench my love.
Far from killing the tender sapling
The gossip works as fertiliser
And mother's scolding is like springkling
Sustaining water on the growing plant.

82

Her glance is magic. It has a two-fold way
It caused him on whom it falls
To sicken and to waste away
But a glance from her is all that's needed
To banish his blues and make his day.

83

I shall want from you the tidings
Only that we never shall part.
But you come and whisper all kinds of things,
That on your journey you shall start
But camper back to me: it brings
No solace at all to my aching heart.
This news does not strum my heart-strings
For I shall drop dead when you depart.

84

He lives in my eyes. I dare not let
My eyelids close as they are apt to do
But these gossips, how vexing they get!
They think he is faithless: they say it out too,
That he keeps away; they sure forget
He lives in me: to me he is true!

INDEX TO VERSE TRANSCOMPOSITIONS

NOTE:

THE object of Index is to help the reader to trace the original of these transcompositions to the various Sangam Works. The figures given under the heading 'Serial Number' refer to the number of the transcomposition and the figures given under the column 'Reference' refer to the number of the originals. Wherever there is only a figure in the column under 'Reference', without a letter or letters of the alphabet attached, the references are to the number of the poem as found in Publication No. 1191 of Tirunelveli Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society Ltd., Madras. References with the Code IA, IB & I.C. refer to Publication No. 1056 of the Tirunelveli Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society Ltd., Madras. Among them, IA refers to the work '*Ainthiṅai Aimbathu*' in this publication, IB to the work '*Ainthiṅai Ezhubathu*' and IC to '*Tiṅai Malai Nūtraimbathu.*'

References with the code 'TK' refer to the volume of '*Tirukural*'; Publication No.490 of the Tirunelveli Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society Ltd., Madras.

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